A Sesquicentennial
Tribute to Galdós 1843-1993

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Therapeutic Figures:
The Body and Its Metaphors
in Fortunata y Jacinta
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In the fourth book of Fortunata y Jacinta, the mild-mannered apothecary Segismundo Ballester professes a love for music and pharmacy, claiming that both these arts offer humankind a cure. Enthusiastically, he explains to Maxi that “En uno y otro arte todo es combinar, combinar,” adding that druggists are nothing less than “los compositores del cuerpo.” The vision of the human body as a composite entity—sometimes harmoniously, more often discordantly constituted—is a frequent motif in Galdós’s masterful novel. Moreover, the body becomes the basis for a cluster of recurrent metaphors, themselves a kind of composite speech in which the literal meanings of words are joined, with varying degrees of “domain incongruence,” to figurative ones. These bodily metaphors are part of the novel’s commentary on subjects as varied as the sickly Maxi’s search for a cure— all and spiritual purificative (in Lupe’s words, a panaceas or “combinación.”

1 Benito Pérez Galdós, Fortunata y Jacinta, Obras completas, ed. Federico Carlos Sainz de Robles, 6 vols. [Madrid: Aguilar, 1970] 5: 856. All further quotes to this edition will be included parenthetically in the text.
2 Andrew Ortony, “Beyond Literal Similarity,” Psychological Review 86 (1979): 161-80. It ought to be noted that metaphors associated with the human body are frequently used to describe metaphor itself, as in the often-discussed category of “dead” (as opposed to “living” or “vivid”) metaphors. 

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the characters and between the narrator and his readers. Beyond the
traits that they all share (linguistic competence, cultural information,
interpretive abilities), there exists a special familiarity that is
facilitated by the common use of a tradition of metaphor: “the
utterance of a metaphor may be viewed as a signal that the speaker
takes his hearers to belong to a [privileged] subset distinguished by a
bond of intimacy.” The narrator’s easy conformity with the envi-
ronment and values of Villalonga, Juanito, and others in their circle is
underscored by their non-problematic use and understanding of a stock
of figures of corporeality to describe the circumstances of daily living.
The use of these same metaphors presupposes a shared attitude of
intimacy (sometimes genuine, sometimes merely conventional)
between the narrator and his readers in Restoration Spain.

Finally, the metaphorical expression of the body in Fortunata y Jacinta fulfills a therapeutic function. When, as Jacinta observes on
her honeymoon, women factory workers are at risk of turning into
“máquinas” and characters such as doña Lupe are distinguished by an
“alma de reloj”—in other words, when the cosmography of society
becomes based on analogies with the machine—then the reliance upon
metaphors of corporeality stands as an act of rhetorical boldness that
suggests a desire to upend the power relations of the symbolic order.
When the social and political forces governing Spain in the 1870s and
1880s reduce individuals to mere cogs and gears in a complex system
based on authority and social consensus, the recurring tropology of the
body forcefully reminds readers of the human shape of human beings.
Galdós amply demonstrates in Fortunata y Jacinta that our experience
of the world is inevitably channelled through the body, which is
inscribed upon culture and vice versa. The point of all this body talk
in the novel is not that physiology is all-powerful and deterministic.
It is rather that meaning, especially as conveyed by metaphor, is in the
end a human creation, invented by individuals not unlike Fortunata
who, in the face of convention, manage to assert the primacy of their
own expression and moral conduct in society.

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